

Comparing Experiences of African Americans during WWI and WWII

Directions:

Read page 75 of Goldenrod article titled "Returning Soldiers" and read attached article "Bomb the Color Line- The War Against Jim Crow." Complete the below task and questions.

Task:

1. For both articles highlight a minimum of two quotes per article that capture the essence (main idea) of the article. In the margin, next to your highlight, explain the meaning of the quotation.

Questions

1. How are the experiences of African Americans similar during WWI and WWII? Explain.
2. How are the experiences of African Americans different during WWI and WWII? Explain.
3. Based on the WWII article (Bomb the Color Line), explain who and what A. Phillip Randolph did during WWII.
4. What was Executive Order 8802?
5. Why does the author argue that the FEPC was designed to fail?

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Directions:
Read &
Annotate!

Start
here

3

"BOMB THE COLOR LINE"

The War Against Jim Crow

FOR HIS DISTINGUISHED devotion to duty and great courage during the Japanese attack on Pearl Harbor, Dorie Miller was awarded the Navy Cross. The War Department sent the hero on a national tour to promote enlistments. Miller returned to the Pacific battlefront, and in December 1943 was listed as missing in action. An African-American song of World War II honored this sharecroppers' son who had given his life for his country:

In nineteen hundred and forty-one
Colored mess boy manned the gun
Although he had never been trained
Had the nerves ever seen
God willing and mother wit
Gon' be gray Dorie Miller yet
Grabbed a gun and took dead aim
Japanese bombers into fiery flame
He was aiming the Japs to fight
Fought at the poles to make things right
Fight on Dorie Miller I know you tried

"Bomb the Color Line"

Did your best for the side
I love Dorie Miller cause he's my race.

"One of the Strangest Paradoxes": A Segregated Army Fights for Democracy

Four years before Miller's act of bravery at Pearl Harbor, Charles H. Houston of the NAACP had demanded that Franklin D. Roosevelt issue an executive order banning all racial discrimination in the armed forces.² But in 1940, Roosevelt signed into law the Selective Service Act, which included a provision that prohibited the intermingling of "colored and white" army personnel in the same regiments.³ "Such a mingling [of whites and blacks] was not a part of the President's policy," stated White House aide General Edwin M. Watson, "and for practical reasons it would be impossible to put into operation. It would seem that Negroes might be inspired to take pride in the efficiency of Negro units in the Army, as representing their contribution to the armed forces."⁴

Roosevelt's refusal to integrate the armed forces provoked disbelief and anger across black America. In a telegram to the White House, A. Philip Randolph of the Brotherhood of Sleeping Car Porters declared: "We are inexpressibly shocked that a President of the United States at a time of national peril should surrender so completely to enemies of democracy who would destroy national unity by advocating segregation. Official approval by the Commander-in-Chief of the Army and Navy of such discrimination and segregation is a stab in the back of democracy." The NAACP denounced the army's segregationist policy: "Declarations of war do not lessen the obligation to preserve and extend civil liberties here while the fight is being made to restore freedom from dictatorship abroad. . . . A Jim Crow army cannot fight for a free world." On October 9, 1940, the *Crisis* carried the headline: "WHITE HOUSE BLESSES JIM CROW."⁷

Blacks highlighted the hypocrisy. "Democracy must wage a two-fold battle — a battle on far flung foreign fields against Hitler, and

DOUBLE VICTORY

a battle on the home front against Hitlerism," insisted Adam Clayton Powell, Jr., a New York City councilman. "How can white Americans expect to have a tolerant world after this war when there is racial prejudice within the ranks of those who are fighting?"⁸ Black columnist George Schuyler castigated the jim crow army: "Our war is not against Hitler in Europe, but against Hitler in America. Our war is not to defend democracy, but to get a democracy we have never had."⁹ In his protest against segregation in the U.S. Armed Forces, the editor of the *Chicago Defender* declared: "We are not exaggerating when we say that the American Negro is damned tired of spilling his blood for empty promises of better days. Why die for democracy for some foreign country when we don't even have it here?" In order to unite the country and win the conflict, the *Defender's* editor demanded that America "bomb the color line."¹⁰

"Prove to us," blacks challenged whites, "that you are not hypocrites when you say this is a war for freedom." For African Americans, the war for freedom had to be fought in their country's own backyard. "The Army jim-crows us," complained a student, "The Navy lets us serve only as messmen... Employers and labor unions shut us out. Lynchings continue. We are disfranchised... spat upon. What more can Hitler do than that."¹¹ In a letter to the NAACP, a soldier wrote: "I am a Negro soldier 22 years old. I won't fight or die in vain. If I fight, suffer or die it will be for the freedom of every black man to live equally with other races. If the life of the Negro in the United States is right as it is lived today, then I would rather be dead."¹² Scheduled to be drafted into the army, a youth declared: "Just carve on my tombstone, 'Here lies a black man killed fighting a yellow man for the protection of a white man.'"¹³ In a poem published in an African-American newspaper, another young man asked:

Dear Lord, today
I go to war:

A

"Bomb the Color Line"

To fight, to die,
Tell me what for?

Dear Lord, I'll fight,
I do not fear,
Germans or Japs;
My fears are here.
America!¹⁴

STOP HERE

The army's color line symbolized white domination in America. "Whitey owns everything," grumbled Malcolm Little, who would later rename himself Malcolm X. "He wants us to go and bleed for him? Let him fight." In 1943, Little received his induction notice. When he reported for his physical examination, he was "costumed like an actor," wearing a "wild zoot suit" and "yellow knob-toe shoes" and his hair frizzled into "a reddish bush of conk." He greeted the soldier at the desk: "Crazy-o, daddy-o, get me moving. I can't wait to get in that brown." The nurse noticed Little's strange behavior and ushered him into the office of the psychiatrist. "Suddenly, I sprang up and peeped under both doors," recalled Little, "the one I'd entered and another that was probably the closet." Then Little bent over and whispered in the psychiatrist's ear: "Daddy-o, now you and me, we're from up North here, so don't you tell nobody. I want to get sent down South. Organize them nigger soldiers, you dig? Steal us some guns, and kill up crackers!" Shortly afterward, Little received a 4-F card.¹⁵

Unlike Little, Winfred W. Lynn of Jamaica, New York, chose to confront rather than evade the discriminatory draft law. In June 1942, after receiving his draft notice, Lynn informed his draft board that he was ready to serve in any unit of the armed forces which was not segregated by race. "Unless I am assured that I can serve in a mixed regiment and that I will not be compelled to serve in a unit undemocratically selected as a Negro group," Lynn wrote, "I will refuse to report for induction." He claimed that his induc-

(Continued: Bomb the Color Line - "The War Against Jim Crow")

Training programs were also segregated. African American soldiers also faced servile work assignments. Skilled blacks found themselves occupationally downgraded. "A lone soldier" wrote to the *Pittsburgh Courier*: "We are members of the 78 Aviation Sqdr, and it seems like we are not being treated fair. Most of us got trades of our own to help win this war. But instead we are servants and ditch diggers and we want better... they got us here washing dishes, working around the officers houses and waiting on them, instead of trying to win this war they got us in ditches,..."

More stressful than experiencing discrimination on army bases was facing the terrible threat of hate violence, especially in small Southern towns. While training at Tuskegee, Alabama, pilot Fred Smith of Chicago was warned by officers: "Don't go off the base or you won't come back. You'll be lynched." On April 3, 1941, at Fort Benning, Georgia, the body of Private Felix Hall was found hanging from a tree, his hands bound behind his back. In a "Statement to the Nation" issued in June 1943, the NAACP declared "The continued ill treatment of Negroes in uniform both on military reservations and in many civilian communities is disgraceful. Negroes in uniform of the nation have been beaten, mobbed, killed, and lynched." The proclamation of the "Four Freedoms," the NAACP said, would be regarded as hypocritical by colored people around the world until President Roosevelt acted to end discrimination in the Army.

Assigned to service and support duties, African Americans composed half of the Transportation Corps in Europe. The transportation corps biggest task was feeding an enormous army in movement. Although they were given support assignment, black soldiers in the Transportation Corps found they were sometimes needed for military duties. "We were responsible for keeping the German saboteurs from blowing up our ammunition," recalled a soldier. "The Germans had dropped young fellows who lived in places like New York and Chicago and spoke perfect English. They could talk about the Brooklyn Dodgers and the White Sox. You couldn't distinguish them from Americans." To avoid such possible confusion, the Army command ordered all white soldiers off the streets at night and assigned black soldiers to do patrol duty.

A BATTLE LINE ON THE HOME FRONT

The war revived the American economy as an "arsenal for democracy." But, as it turned out, defense jobs were not democratically distributed: most of them were reserved for whites only. Seventy-five percent of the war industries refused to hire blacks, while 15 percent hired them only for menial jobs. In 1940, blacks constituted only 0.2 percent of the workers in aircraft production. Of the 6,000 employees of Vultee Aircraft in 1941, none were black. "It is not the policy of this company," the defense contractor stated, "to employ other than of the Caucasian race."⁶² Only ten of the 33,000 workers of Douglas Aircraft Company were black. "While we are in complete sympathy with the Negro," the president of North American Aviation stated frankly, "it is against company policy to employ them as aircraft workers or mechanics... regardless of their training."⁶³ On the cover of its July issue, the *Crisis* featured a photograph of an airplane factory with the caption "For Whites Only." The NAACP denounced discrimi-

DOUBLE VICTORY

nation in the defense industry: "Warplanes — Negro Americans may not build them, repair them, or fly them, but they must help pay for them."⁶⁴

Confined to the unskilled and the service occupations before the war, African Americans wanted the better and higher-paying factory jobs generated by the war. As the country began to mobilize its war economy in early 1941, branches of the NAACP organized protests against discrimination in the defense plants of Detroit, Chicago, Los Angeles, and other cities. Pickets carried signs with messages: "Let's Blitzkrieg the Color Line," "Down with Jim-Crow in National Defense," "If We Can Fight for Democracy, We Can Work for Democracy," "A Bullet Draws No Color Line But Bullet Makers Do," "Not Hitlerism But Americanism, Jobs for All."⁶⁵

The political iron was hot. Unwilling to wait for employers to open their doors voluntarily, African Americans demanded action from the federal government. At a 1941 meeting in Chicago, a black woman called for a mass demonstration in Washington: "We ought to throw 50,000 Negroes around the White House, bring them from all over the country, in jalopies, in trains and any way they can get there, and throw them around the White House and keep them there until we can get some action from the White House."⁶⁶

The idea of a march on Washington seized the imagination of A. Philip Randolph, president of the Brotherhood of Sleeping Car Porters. "Let the Negro masses speak," he declared. "Negroes have a stake in National Defense. It is a big stake. . . . The stake involves jobs. It involves equal employment opportunities."⁶⁷ In his "Call to the March on Washington," Randolph demanded an end to discrimination not only in the military but also in the defense industries: "Negroes, by the mobilization and coordination of their mass power, can cause PRESIDENT ROOSEVELT TO ISSUE AN EXECUTIVE ORDER ABOLISHING DISCRIMINATION IN ALL GOVERNMENT DEPARTMENTS, ARMY, NAVY, AIR CORPS AND NATIONAL DEFENSE JOBS."⁶⁸

Randolph was determined to make Roosevelt do the right thing; translate the pronouncements of the democratic war aims abroad

"Bomb the Color Line"

into practices of equality at home. "An 'all-out' thundering march on Washington," the union leader promised, "ending in a monster and huge demonstration at Lincoln's Monument will shake up white America."⁶⁹ Randolph's threat of a mass demonstration alarmed Washington officials. "What will they think in Berlin?" they anxiously asked. Blacks replied: "Oh, perhaps no more than they already think of America's racial policy."⁷⁰ The march was scheduled for July 1.

At the White House on June 18, Roosevelt met with civil rights leaders, including Randolph. Opening the discussion with small talk, the president said: "Hello, Phil. Which class were you in at Harvard?" Randolph replied: "I never went to Harvard." Roosevelt then began entertaining his guests with old political anecdotes. Impatient, Randolph respectfully interrupted: "Mr. President, time is running on. You are quite busy, I know. But what we want to talk with you about is the problem of jobs for Negroes in defense industries. Our people are being turned away at factory gates because they are colored. They can't live with this thing. Now, what are you going to do about it?"

Roosevelt offered to call up the heads of defense plants and urge them to hire blacks. "We want you to do more than that," Randolph countered. "We want something concrete, something tangible, definite, positive, and affirmative." Asked what he meant, Randolph presented his radical proposal: "Mr. President, we want you to issue an executive order making it mandatory that Negroes be permitted to work in these plants." Roosevelt said that he would not do anything unless the march was first called off. "Questions like this can't be settled with a sledge hammer," Randolph replied: "I'm sorry, Mr. President, the march cannot be called off." Then Roosevelt asked the black leader how many people would be at the march. "One hundred thousand, Mr. President."⁷¹

A week later, Roosevelt signed Executive Order 8802: "There shall be no discrimination in the employment of workers in defense industries or Government because of race, creed, color, or national origin . . . and it is the duty of employers and of labor or-

ganizations . . . to provide for the full and equitable participation of all workers in defense industries, without discrimination because of race, creed, color, or national origin." His order also established the Committee on Fair Employment Practices to investigate complaints of discrimination and take appropriate steps to redress valid grievances.⁷²

The march was canceled. Black munitions worker Margaret Wright recalled that it was only Randolph's threat of a march on Washington that "made Roosevelt give this proclamation, because no one does anything — you never get anything — out of the goodness of people's hearts."⁷³

But Roosevelt's new policy was designed for failure. In its first year of operation, the FEPC had but seven field officers and five clerical workers, with a budget of only \$80,000. Even after the committee's personnel were increased, its budget totaled only \$431,609, far below the funding allocated to other government departments.

Moreover, Roosevelt's FEPC had no teeth to enforce equal employment. According to a federal government report, blacks were complaining that the FEPC had "no power to penalize violators of the non-discrimination order," and that the committee's hearings were merely "a token of the government's wish to rectify the situation, rather than an actual solution of the problem."⁷⁴ In *Oppportunity: Journal of Negro Life*, George E. DeMar pointed out that Roosevelt's "Executive Order was accepted as policy, but all too often not for practice, by those holding war contracts."⁷⁵ In "An Open Letter to President Roosevelt — An Editorial," the *Crisis* impatiently informed the President that in too many communities "your Executive Order 8802 was being defied and sabotaged by management and labor alike."⁷⁶

Knowing that the government would not interfere with war production and that the FEPC had neither the power nor the will to desegregate, white laborers resisted the federal government's efforts to integrate the war industries. In 1943, for example, twenty thousand white workers rioted to protest the upgrading of black

welders in the Alabama Dry Dock and Shipbuilders Company. After federal troops intervened, the FEPC agreed to allow segregation to continue in the shipyards.

Ultimately, the real pressure for employment integration came from the sheer need for labor in America's booming war industries. Almost 1 million African Americans entered the industrial labor force during the war years. At the beginning of 1942, only 3 percent of defense workers were black; by November 1944, that number had jumped to 8.3 percent. Blacks constituted 25 percent of the labor force in foundries and 12 percent in shipbuilding and steel mills.⁷⁷ They also entered employment in the auto industry. In 1943, 55,000 of the 450,000 members of Detroit's United Auto Workers were African Americans. During the war years, the wages of black families increased from 40 percent to 60 percent of that of white families.⁷⁸

Pulled by job opportunities in the war industries, over a half million African Americans left the South. During the decade of the 1940s, the percentage of blacks living in the South declined from 77 percent to 68 percent. Following the jobs to the cities, blacks classified as urban dwellers increased from 49 percent to 62 percent. They migrated, again as they had during World War I, to the Midwestern cities like Chicago and Detroit. But this time, they also went to California, where they found war-related jobs in Los Angeles, Oakland, Richmond, and San Francisco. "I came to California in 1943," recalled Ella Johnson. "The shipyard people came to Louisiana offering \$1.20 an hour to work in California. I'd work for as little as 25 cents an hour, 50 cents an hour, and thinking I was doing pretty good. Had I ever seen a ship? I imagine I had not. I didn't even know what a ship looked like. But they were hiring, so we went."⁷⁹

STOP HERE

As a teenager living in San Francisco at the time, Maya Angelou witnessed the movement of blacks into the Fillmore District, which had been inhabited by Japanese Americans until their evacuation and internment. "As the Japanese disappeared, soundlessly and without protest," she wrote in her autobiography, "the Ne-

A Battle Line on the Home Front

Of the 1 million African Americans who entered defense employment during the war years, 600,000 were women. Between 1940 and 1944, the percentage of black women in industry increased from 6.5 percent to 18 percent of the female workforce. For African American women, defense work offered escape from domestic work. Between 1940 and 1944 the proportion of black women employed in housework declined from 60 percent to 45 percent. Even after doors were opened to black women, however, they often found themselves assigned to non-skilled jobs such as janitors and cafeteria workers. Many women also found that they had two shifts: one at the plant and a second at home. Wanita Allen complained that she had to "rush, rush, rush" — get dinner ready, wash clothes, iron clothes, clean the house. "By the time I got in bed it was time to get up in the morning."

The war had given African Americans a taste of the honey of equality. "A lot of blacks that were sharecropping, doing menial work and stuff," said defense worker Margaret Wright, "got into the army and saw how other things were and how things could be. They decided they did not want to go back to what they were doing before. They did not want to walk behind a plow, they wouldn't get on the back of the bus anymore."

As black and white workers followed the defense jobs into the cities, however, they often clashed violently. In 1943, at the height of industrial production for the war, urban race riots exploded across the country. The Social Science Institute at Fisk University reported that 242 racial battles had occurred that year in forty-seven cities.